

R. K. Narayan's Memoir: My Days a Critical Study

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Abstract:

“My Days” is an autobiography which tells the story of R. K. Narayan’s brought up commences with his childhood days he spent in his grandmother’s home in Chennai and his initial college years at Mysore followed by a brief stint as college teacher and in vivid details describes his journey as an author. Narayan was a leading author of early Indian literature in English. It’s his mentor Graham Greene, an English novelist-cum-journalist, who discovered potentialities in Narayan as an innate writer and he is instrumental in getting publishers for Narayan’s early books which made him a celebrated writer. He was the winner of Central Sahitya Academy award for “The Guide” which was adapted for the film (winning a Film fare Award for Best Film) and for Broadway. He chooses characters of everyday life and highlights the social context while portraying realistic presentation of contemporary society and thus standing as towering personality among Indian writers in English.

Keywords:

Memoir, auto-biography, reminiscence, mirror up to nature, memories, nostalgia, recollection of past, formative days, fiction, art of writing, profundity, humour and pathos, personal experiences, imaginative writing, professional writing, promising career, heteroglossia and detached observer.

“My Days” written by Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami, popularly known as R. K. Narayan is a celebrated piece of writing in the form of an autobiography appeared first time originally in the year 1974 with a difference. The reader may have the impression as if it is a piece of fiction rather than an autobiography. As a matter of fact, in several ways it’s akin to novel. “My Days” is a unique autobiography with a touch of affinity and the vicissitudes of Narayan’s personal life, his penchant not only as an individual but also as a writer. Like most of his novels, “My Days” too is regional in that it conveys a sense of a specified place --- Malgudi, a fictional literary landscape created and Mysore like Thomas Hardy’s Wessex. The autobiography projects the life in “My Days” that of Narayan’s own class, the Indian middle class, where most of the people are not aristocrats to be unworried about property. He appears to be the hero of one of his novels as sensitive, modest and wry about himself, and with a latent resolute will power. We see here, the first context of which fascinate Narayan; within this the minute circle of the family; and then a figure posing modesty but with an inward conviction, Narayan himself, another Narayan hero. He was highly influenced by an immense power of inherited tradition of India in balance with a positive but subdued individuality. His novels are profusely suffused with an admixture of humour and pathos similar to American writer O. Henry’s short stories and the

quiet disciplined life as revealed in “My Days” is both suffused with a pure and unaffected grief and also lighted with a touch of mockery of both self and others. Thus, “My Days” is penned just the way R. K. Narayan used to pen his short stories and novels with a direct prose in a transparent form and distinct personality analysis.

The memoir “My Days” is quite unpretentious in the intention as in its rendering because R. K. Narayan adopted the self-same style of narration, selecting every situation and puts everything either to satiric or humorous treatment. Like in his historic novels, there is a basic perception enlivening or aligning the record of his life. Despite the fact that one is aware of the overwhelming background of Indian past, of the great crowd dead and alive moving in the mind and along the highways, of the deep and smothering life of the family, one becomes fully aware of veracity Narayan was to express in “The English Teacher”: “A profound and unmitigated loneliness is the only truth of life”. In this delicately developed account of his life, his adolescence, his work, his family and the tragedy of the demise of his better half, Rajam, the artist who created and populated Malgudi, working in the easy English and with the same attentive attitude to life, fetches his own nature the gift for moral analysis, the extraordinary talent, and the eye for human queerness that separates the novels. Thus, he is a multi-faceted genius describing the events down-to-earth. When Narayan was not in Madras, he used to play with a circular iron hoop in the company of his street friends. He enjoyed thoroughly playing in the heat of the Madras sun in this manner. The description of his early childhood in Madras is the reminiscent of the first novel entitled “Swami and Friends”, Narayan himself mentions:

“I practically lived in the streets in those days and no one seemed to have noticed it”.

A few sections of “My Days” are the recollections of Narayan’s “Swami and Friends”, his magnum opus, dealing with hero’s growth into maturity via a series of adolescent difficulties. His account of boyhood days, against the backdrop of tranquil setting of familial life, passed on without sudden twists and reversal of life. Being brought up in one’s immediate family is common in a society where family bonds, however extended, were very sticky. Narayan was brought to Madras, as a kid and for him living with grandmother was like a more settled. The young Narayan’s excessive affection for domestic animals--- the peacock and the monkey, green parrots and his early experiences include his evening strolls in the local busy streets. Whenever he walked as a kid, hand in glove with his uncle, sneaking out of the house unnoticed, the streets offered endless material to this precociously alert observer, provocation to wonder, nutrition for imagination, education for feelings, besides the reminders of the harshness of life as well as proximity of death. The account of his school days in urban life of Madras while staying with his uncle replete with reminiscences and humour make an interesting reading. His intrinsic desire for story-telling has commenced in his uncle’s house. His picturesque days as a school-going child form the basis for the first novel, “Swami and Friends”. One can find out in his memoir, Narayan’s delicate feeling for the young Narayan’s fleeting attention and the abstract mathematics dryness, which he is expected to get mastery. The cool, nimbleness of perception and the keen observation of the child’s nature besides the mind which can issue into unsullied fun leads into a poetic sense of the intensities of the boy’s experience and the depth of his personality. Time and again, Narayan pictures his father as stern and stringent headmaster, with his casualness takes one to the portrayal of the headmaster in “Swami and Friends”. The young Narayan’s affinity with his father, his unsteady span of attention and outright distaste for abstraction and the business of learning how to

accommodate himself have been incorporated in the work. Throughout his works, we observe him using heteroglossia as technique.

In the next part of Narayan's memoir, he talks about the peak stage of his promising career; how he was shifted from Madras to Bangalore, and his trials and tribulations in gaining accommodation to a new locality and the rigidity of his conservative father, the affectionate caresses of his mother. This is followed by the nostalgia of his school days in Bangalore with autobiographical probity and concreteness. The latter portion of his memoir deals with his career as journalist. Here Narayan feelingly reminiscent of his past comprising his failures and accolades in the capacity of an editor in his self-patronised celebrated journal viz. "Indian Thought", which he started with the capital fund of 100 rupees. Gradually he transformed himself into the profession as a full-fledged novelist. He continues his narration about traumatic memories and bitter experiences in his hard days particularly, when he hardly found any publisher in the West. It's Graham Greene, who discovered Narayan and introduced him to the world of readership and continued as a friend, guide and philosopher till he breathed his last, thus, stretching his popularity from New York to Moscow. He is admitted into the elite community of the fiction writers, and his repute stands tall, unrivalled and unstilted. Narayan himself relates: "My life has fallen firmly into a professional pattern: books, agents, contracts and plenty of letter-writing to known and unknown persons alike, and, of course, travel over and over again. But my personal life has become more interesting".

Narayan also mentions in "My Days" how Madras was affected in World War One besides World War Two. His father enrolled him as a student of Maharaja's Collegiate High School in Mysore and thus ended one phase of his life. There is a hilarious mention by R. K. Narayanan that his teachers kept on asking him whether he had any doubts in his studies and if so, he was to ask their guidance. However, according to Narayan :

"Where was any room for doubts? Doubts arise only with at least partial understanding". He doesn't mean to hint that his teachers didn't teach well but mentioned that he was incapable of understanding the subject matter. He says he existed under a whole cloud of unknowing and was not within the realm of his surroundings. Thus, we can see the rising of creative author in Narayan when we read such descriptions of his imaginative life in a sort of dream world. When Narayan resided in Mysore city he grabbed each and every opportunity for paying a visit to his daughter and his grandchildren. He provides an oblique as well as objective treatment as anything like a memoir could possibly be, exhibits in particular Narayan's fascination with the intricate association of sincerity and self-deception in human life that is seen often in his writings. Through his novels and short stories, he unravels mysteries and universal riddles of mankind. Realistic portrayal of human nature that holds mirror up to nature is the key to his writings. A frequent reader of Narayan perceives his conspicuous absence in works as he detaches himself unlike his autobiography where we understand his "involved narration". He hardly cared for the political developments which were a part of the nationalist movement during Indian independence era and he is unruffled by the political unrest and pandemonium. He shies away from the ripples of political turmoil as he considers them less important in the memoir. It's evident that he redeems his life trivial and less significant, since he is neither a businessman nor a political heavyweight and he's an ordinary human being having ordinary issues of life happy when rich

and unhappy when ridden with poverty. Narayan never assumes for himself as preacher nor adviser rather suggests the ideal living and his vision of living is unsullied and uncomplicated. As Pascal puts it, a memoir could never be “self-effacing and self-assuring”, rather attempts to cull out forms of many predilections. This autobiography is a clean self-projection refrain from inhibitions and fallacies. As a matter of fact, “My Days” it’s a ‘tour de force’ to have given the “facts” a status of fictional artefact. Thus, R. K. Narayan’s autobiography, “My Days” has been rightly called by Updike (1975) as “One of Narayan’s most subtly and deliberately constructed books” and thus ultimately making it as his magnum opus.

References:

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